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The Politics of Gustave Courbet's Landscape Paintings

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My thesis focuses on Gustave Courbet's landscape painting *The Valley of Les Puits-Noir* from 1868. The purpose of my thesis is to extend the political reading that scholars have argued about his other paintings to *The Valley of Les Puits-Noir*. This reading can be applied to his entire body of landscapes in future studies. Courbet was opposed to Napoleon III and the Second Empire, an opposition he visibly communicated in his earlier genre paintings. Scholars have written about Courbet's landscapes, and consider them neutral when compared to his earlier works. My research focuses on the political history during the period, on landscape paintings by contemporary Barbizon School artists, and on *The Valley of Les Puits-Noir* itself. I argue that this landscape embodies Courbet's deep hatred of the Second Empire, especially the industrialization and modernization endeavors that expanded its influence into the countryside Courbet loved.

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LAKE FOREST COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

The Politics of Gustave Courbet's Landscape Paintings

by

Nicolette Zorn

April 29, 2013

The report of the investigation undertaken as a
Senior Thesis, to carry one course of credit in
the Department of Art and Art History

Michael T. Orr
Krebs Provost, and Dean of the Faculty

Ann Roberts, Chairperson

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Dan LeMahieu

Abstract

My thesis focuses on Gustave Courbet's landscape painting *The Valley of Les Puits-Noir* from 1868. The purpose of my thesis is to extend the political reading that scholars have argued about his other paintings to *The Valley of Les Puits-Noir*. This reading can be applied to his entire body of landscapes in future studies. Courbet was opposed to Napoleon III and the Second Empire, an opposition he visibly communicated in his earlier genre paintings. Scholars have written about Courbet's landscapes, and consider them neutral when compared to his earlier works. My research focuses on the political history during the period, on landscape paintings by contemporary Barbizon School artists, and on *The Valley of Les Puits-Noir* itself. I argue that this landscape embodies Courbet's deep hatred of the Second Empire, especially the industrialization and modernization endeavors that expanded its influence into the countryside Courbet loved.

Dedicated to my parents, Amy and Andrew Zorn, who exposed me to art from an early age and always encouraged my academic studies.

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INTRODUCTION

Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) was a prominent Realist painter during the Second Republic (1848-1852) and the Second Empire (1852-1870) in France. The Second Republic governed France beginning in 1848, after the abdication of Louis-Philippe (1773-1850) and the end of his constitutional monarchy. An election in 1848 made Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte (1808-1873) President of France and created a legislative assembly to rule with him. This made governing France difficult because of differing views between the President and the assembly about how to run the country. They ruled together until 1851, when Louis-Napoleon staged a coup d'état. This action dissolved the legislative assembly in order to increase the President's power, and had overwhelming support from the people. In 1852, Louis-Napoleon was declared Emperor with no open protest, and with ninety-seven percent approval from the men of France. This began the Second Empire in France, with Napoleon III as its emperor.¹ Courbet was not a supporter of the Empire because of his Republican ideals, which preferred an elected head of state with term limits, and better representation of the people. The Second Empire, as well as Louis-Napoleon's increasingly autocratic presidency before it, did not satisfy

¹ *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s.v. "France: The Second Republic, 1848-52," accessed March 30, 2013, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/215768/France/40439/The-Second-Republic-1848-52>.

these criteria in Courbet's eyes, so he used his artworks to depict his dissatisfactions with both the Second Republic and the Second Empire.

Courbet's negative political and societal views often present themselves in his artworks. Courbet became notorious for his large-scale depictions of workers and peasants performing mundane activities, largely because of the political dissent that was implied through these depictions. *The Stonebreakers*² (fig. 1) is an example of depicting dissatisfaction with the government through working-class subjects, because of Courbet's presentation of the central figures. There are two figures, a man and a boy, dressed in dirty worn-out clothing, with their backs to the viewer. They are performing one of the most mundane, demeaning, manual activities: breaking big rocks into smaller rocks. The size of this canvas, combined with the dirty and anonymous workers implies that there are many people living in desperate conditions, and the government does not care to help them, or try to fix it. This was a problem during the Second Republic that continued into the Second Empire. *The Stonebreakers* is just one instance of Courbet using large-scale paintings of the lower classes to communicate problems he saw with the government. Many of his paintings from the Second Republic and the beginning of the Second Empire depict themes that are meant to critique the government. His later, lesser known, landscape paintings also communicate his critical views, but in a different and more toned-down manner than his large-scale Realist genre paintings.

² Gustave Courbet. *The Stonebreakers* (*The Stone Breakers*/ *The Stone-Breakers*), 1849, oil on canvas, 5' 5" x 7' 9". Destroyed. More information about this painting can be found in T. J Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the Second French Republic 1848-1851* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1973).

Courbet's large Realist paintings were often received with hatred and critiques, from both the people and the government, which made it difficult for him to maintain a living as an artist. Courbet constantly experienced monetary troubles and knew the delicate position he was in with the government and the public, because of the subjects he chose to paint. This was especially true during the Second Empire in France, which was strict in its censorship of potentially negative messages conveyed through the media and artworks.³ Courbet did not want to compromise the subjects and views he depicted to satisfy the government and make money. Rather than rely on government approval, Courbet trusted private collectors for financial support. An 1861 letter that Courbet sent to Francis Wey, the inspector general of the Department of Archives in Paris, shows his awareness of these conditions:

...It is absolutely necessary that I sell this year if I want to continue painting... the government, which is a slave to its own institutions, cannot support me. Consequently I must rely on private collectors if I want to go on being as free as I am.⁴

Courbet needed to prevent the Second Empire from censoring his paintings, he needed to depict images that patrons would want to buy, and he needed to do this while not sacrificing his personality as a painter. Courbet's pure landscape paintings allowed him to satisfy all three criteria. Landscapes are a traditionally neutral subject; they were popular in the art market during this period (shown in fig.

³ John Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe From the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton., 2010), 726.

⁴ Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, ed., *Letters of Gustave Courbet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 195. Letter from Courbet to Francis Wey, 1861.

2), and he could use formal techniques, such as light and depth, rather than subject matter to express his opinions.

I will use *The Valley of Les Puits-Noir* (fig. 3) from 1868 as a case study to focus on the formal aspects of Courbet's landscape paintings, arguing that the depictions of depth and the overall mood of this painting communicate Courbet's pessimistic views about the future of the countryside under Napoleon III's reign. I will also focus on the political climate of the Second Empire and its industrial expansions, paying special attention to the railway system that expanded its reach into the countryside. In order to understand Courbet's views about the Second Empire, I will look to his personal letters. I will also compare *The Valley of Les Puits-Noir* to other landscapes from Courbet's time to show how Courbet departed from the expectations for landscape paintings during this time.

Gustave Courbet was born in 1819 in Ornans, a small town located in the Franche-Comté region of France. His father was a wealthy farmer who paid for Courbet to travel to Paris in 1840 to learn painting. Courbet studied with a few minor artists in Paris, but spent most of his time copying works by the old masters in the Louvre. After some time in Paris Courbet adopted the Bohemian lifestyle, which is an unconventional way of living characterized by asceticism and defiance.⁵ Artists who rebelled against the accepted conventions for painting set by the French Academy, which was a government sponsored institution that oversaw the

⁵ Stephen F. Eisenman, Thomas Crow, Brian Lukacher, Linda Nochlin, and Francis K. Pohl, *Nineteenth Century Art: A Critical History* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 260; Beatrice Farwell, *The Cult of Images: Baudelaire and the 19th-Century Media Explosion* (Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Printing, 1977), 132.

education of artists and decided what the official art of the country would be, would be labeled as Bohemians by society anyway.⁶ Courbet consistently rebelled against the Academy, which is visible in his large-scale genre paintings from the late 1840's to the mid 1850's, because the Academy wanted these large canvases to be reserved for beautiful and grandiose history paintings, not dirty peasants at work.⁷

During the 1848 revolutions, Courbet stayed away from the physical fighting, as he did with most every armed conflict in his lifetime. He believed in “waging a war of the intellect,” something he felt he was already achieving with his artworks. He believed that intellect, not violence and rebellion, would bring about the change that was needed. Regardless, he was happy to see the overthrow of Louis-Philippe (1773-1850) and the establishment of the Second Republic.⁸ 1848 was a beneficial year for Courbet because the entrance requirements for the Salons were loosened and liberalized. This made access, and a conspicuous position in the show, possible for Courbet for the first time. He exhibited ten works at the Salon of 1848, including *After Dinner at Ornans*,⁹ and eleven works at the Salon of 1849.¹⁰ His prominent showings and success at these two Salons made Courbet a permanent fixture in French painting until the fall of the Second Empire.

⁶ Eisenman, *Nineteenth Century Art*, 261.

⁷ Jean Bouret, *The Barbizon School and 19th Century French Landscape Painting*, (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 10, 243.

⁸ Eisenman, *Nineteenth Century Art*, 261.

⁹ Gustave Courbet. *After Dinner at Ornans*, 1848, oil on canvas, 101.18" x 76.77". Lille: Musée des Beaux-Arts. More information about this painting can be found in Clark, *Image of the People*

¹⁰ Eisenman, *Nineteenth Century Art*, 261.

In later Salons Courbet became more political in his genre paintings. He displayed *The Stonebreakers*, *A Burial at Ornans*,¹¹ and *The Peasants of Flagey Returning from the Fair*¹² in the Salon of 1850-51.¹³ Critics and the general public greeted these images with controversy, criticisms, and hatred. They were described as “Socialist painting,” and “an engine of revolution,” and were attacked for being “deliberately ugly.”¹⁴ Even though Courbet’s Realist paintings, and paintings from the Realism movement itself, were consistently criticized for being dirty, unflattering, and unoriginal, they never fully disappeared from public view or discussion. This was because of the changing government and social conditions, as well as the rules of the Salon system, which were changed after 1848 to include people other than members of the Academy on the jury. Allowing artists and critics onto the jury made it easier for less conventional painters to gain entrance into these shows, which allowed Courbet continued access to yearly government-sponsored Salons.¹⁵ The consistent hatred and condemning of his works kept Courbet prominent in the art world during the latter half of the nineteenth century due to the controversial images he would submit year after year. He also had supporters, however, including: Jules Castagnary (1830-1888), Champfleury (1820-1889), Max Buchon (1818-1869), Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), and Pierre-

¹¹ Gustave Courbet. *A Burial at Ornans*, 1849-50, oil on canvas, 10' 4" x 21' 8". Paris, Musée d'Orsay. More information on this painting can be found in Clark, *Image of the People*.

¹² Gustave Courbet. *The Peasants of Flagey Returning from the Fair*, 1850, oil on canvas, 108.27" x 81.91". Besançon, Musée des Beaux-Arts et d'Archéologie. More information about this painting can be found in Clark, *Image of the People*

¹³ Eisenman, *Nineteenth Century Art*, 266.

¹⁴ Ibid., 267.

¹⁵ Ibid., 261

Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865).¹⁶ Champfleury, an art critic and friend of Courbet's, especially admired Realism, and consistently defended it against detractors by praising its truthfulness to reality.¹⁷

Courbet painted more than large-scale genre scenes symbolizing his dissatisfaction with French society, although these are regarded as his masterpieces. He was capable of depicting scenes and people on a smaller scale while still maintaining a political undertone, which is visible in his depictions of landscapes. His landscape paintings continue the goal he set for himself in 1848: to include a political message in his images. The covert politics of these images, which Courbet achieved through formal qualities rather than the subject matter, kept his landscapes popular with patrons. Industrialists liked them the most, because they wanted serene images of the countryside to provide relief from the environment of the urban cities in which they lived.¹⁸

The formal qualities of Courbet's landscape paintings from the second half of the nineteenth century communicate his criticisms about the Second Empire under Napoleon III. Landscapes were a traditionally politically neutral subject, and were very popular in the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁹ By painting this popular subject in his own style, Courbet could be political while still appealing to the market, which

¹⁶ Michael Fried, *Courbet's Realism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 1.

¹⁷ *Dictionary of Art Historians*, s.v. "Champfleury [Fleury-Husson, Jules-Francios-Felix], Accessed April 2, 2013.
<http://www.dictionaryofarthistorians.org/champfleuryj.htm>.

¹⁸ Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, *Nineteenth Century European Art*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2006), 285; Eisenman, *Nineteenth Century Art*, 263.

¹⁹ Chu, *Nineteenth Century European Art*, 285.

allowed him to make a living and stay under the radar of the censors. His Puits-noir paintings, on which I am focusing my study, were especially popular, earning him “...twenty or twenty-two thousand francs...” This included some money from the Empire itself, which bought one of these images for the imperial collection.²⁰ This shows just how successful Courbet was at masking his political messages beneath formal qualities in his landscapes, because the government itself bought one without properly reading or understanding it.

Other painters, such as members of the Barbizon school, used nature to depict their feelings about society as well. The Barbizon painters desired to express their own emotions in nature; they tended to be optimistic and inviting with their paintings.²¹ Courbet was more pessimistic, and used his landscape paintings to depict his view that retreating into nature was not a solution for escaping the industrialization and materialism of Napoleonic Paris.²² Courbet utilizes a gloomy atmosphere and flat surface in his images to depict this point of view.

Courbet’s landscapes seemingly conform to the expected values and conventions of nineteenth century landscape painting. These images provide a serene glance into an uncorrupted natural scene, which was a characteristic sought after in later nineteenth century landscape painting.²³ Upon further investigation, however, we discover that these paintings also deliver a negative message about the

²⁰ Chu, *Letters of Gustave Courbet*, 277. Letter from Courbet to Urbain Cuenot, 1866.

²¹ Lilien F. Robinson, *La Vie Moderne: Nineteenth-Century French Art from the Corcoran Gallery*, (Washington DC.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1983), 19.

²² Jean Bouret, *The Barbizon School and 19th Century French Landscape Painting*, 21-22.

²³ Ann Wagner, “Courbet’s Landscapes and Their Market,” *Art History*, 4 (1981), 411-413.

industrial endeavors undertaken by Napoleon III. Specifically, Courbet's landscapes communicate his dissatisfaction with the expanded transportation capabilities and tourism industry during the Second Empire. These industries were slowly transforming the aesthetics and scenery of the French countryside, and allowed Napoleon III to more directly control the provinces and easily expand his influence all over France.

Current literature on the subject of Courbet's landscapes is abundant. Scholars focus on different aspects of these landscapes, including their role in the art market, how the viewer was meant to perceive them, or whether or not they could be allegories for the human body. Only one scholar, Klaus Herding, focuses on the social history of the Second Empire and its possible relationship to these paintings. He does not, however, touch on the possibility that these landscapes were more than a tacit acceptance of the industrialization endeavors of the Napoleonic Second Empire, which Courbet regarded as shameful to France.²⁴ Even though Courbet may have known he could not stop industrialization, he would not have accepted it, as Herding seems to suggest. Overall, current scholarship about Courbet's landscapes does not seriously consider the political history of the nineteenth century, and how Courbet could have used his landscapes as a vehicle of political critique.

²⁴ Klaus Herding, "Equality and Authority in Courbet's Landscape Painting," in *Courbet: to Venture Independence*, trans. John William Gabriel, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 77; Chu, *Letters of Gustave Courbet*, 443. Letter from Courbet to Lydie Joliclerc, 1871.

Courbet detested the “abominable regime”²⁵ of Napoleon III, and would have taken every opportunity to undermine his reign. Political opposition communicated through his large-scale depictions of the working class in an unflattering manner characterized the first half of Courbet’s career. As the Second Empire went on, Napoleon III began to expand censorship, especially on political dissent. An example of the Second Empire censoring an artwork because of a potentially negative reading is Courbet’s *Venus and Psyche*,²⁶ (fig. 4) which was censored by the Second Empire in 1864 for “reasons of impropriety.” In actuality, it was probably censored because of the relationship between the two figures and the setting in which they are placed, which implies that the scene depicts lesbian prostitutes in a brothel. Courbet also intended the image to be a “biting mockery of the gentlemen of the grand art of painting...”²⁷ The immorality depicted in this image was also probably a critique about the public’s condemning of lesbianism, but its popularity among patrons of brothels.²⁸ The allegorical title *Venus and Psyche* was not enough to hide the political critique inherent in this image, and as a result, Napoleon III censored it.

The types of images Courbet painted around 1848 would no longer be acceptable to the regime in the 1860’s. Courbet would not have ended his intellectual war on the Second Empire because of its censorship; he would have

²⁵ Chu, *Letters of Gustave Courbet*, 401. Letter from Courbet to Jules Simon, 1870.

²⁶ Gustave Courbet. *Venus and Psyche*, 1864, 57” x 77”, oil on canvas. Location unknown. More information about this painting can be found in Petra ten-Doesschate Chu’s article “Gustave Courbet’s *Venus and Psyche*: Uneasy Nudity in Second-Empire France,” *Art Journal* 51, no.1 (1992).

²⁷ Chu, *Letters of Gustave Courbet*, 182. Letter from Courbet to Amand Gautier, 1860.

²⁸ Chu, “Gustave Courbet’s *Venus and Psyche*,” 38, 41.

found a new way to convey his increasingly negative opinions. Pure landscape paintings allowed him to continue his critiques of Napoleon III, while avoiding censorship or arrest.

COURBET AND THE GOVERNMENT

The Second Empire was established after years of instability following the French Revolution in 1789, the July Revolution in 1830, the French Revolution of 1848, and Louis-Napoleon's coup d'état in 1851. Napoleon III ruled the Second Empire and wanted to unify, industrialize, mechanize, and improve the economy of France. He achieved a lot of good for the nation, including the rebuilding of Paris and the expansion of its railway network. Foreign policy, however, was Napoleon III's weakness and eventually caused his downfall. This section focuses on a brief history of France from the end of the July Monarchy to the end of the Second Republic, with specific attention paid to the development of the French railroad system.

The expansion of the railroad system allowed expanded travel options for the French public, who began to travel by train more than ever during this period, as seen in Alain Plessis' chart showing the growth in popularity of the railways for both travel and shipping between 1852 and 1869 (fig. 5). This new, fast and cheap form of travel expanded people's horizons, and allowed them to visit new places such as the Forest of Fontainebleau and the Jura region.²⁹ Additionally, quick and easy transportation opened the possibility for people to live in the countryside and work in the city. This new transportation also contributed to the rise of the tourism

²⁹ Alain Plessis, *The Rise and Fall of the Second Empire, 1852-1871*, trans. Jonathan Mandelbaum (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 85-87.

industry in France, which led to areas such as the Forest of Fontainebleau becoming tourist spots because they were easy train rides from Paris.³⁰

This expanded transportation network was probably a big help for Courbet and artists of the Barbizon school as well, because they were constantly traveling into and out of France. Courbet, however, “would never applaud M. Napoléon, whatever he may do” so he probably did not approve of the newly expanded railway network.³¹ Courbet’s discontent with the industrial achievements of the Second Empire is visible in his later landscape paintings, such as *The Valley of Les Puits-Noir*, which he was working on while these train lines were rapidly expanding across the French countryside. By contrast, painters of the Barbizon school, to be discussed later, thought this new movement into nature was a good thing, to a certain extent, because it provided an easy escape from increasingly industrialized Paris.

The End of the July Monarchy

The July Revolution in 1830 overthrew King Charles X (1757-1836) and brought Louis-Philippe (1773-1850) to the throne.³² Louis-Philippe was the king of a liberal Orleanist monarchy in France from 1830-1848. Louis-Philippe was an Orleanist monarch because he is a descendant of the Duke of Orleans; Orleanists supported this family’s claim to the French throne.³³ Liberalism supported

³⁰ Dita Amory, “The Barbizon School: French Painters of Nature,” http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/bfpn/hd_bfpn.htm.

³¹ Chu, *Letters of Gustave Courbet*, 105. Letter from Courbet to Francis Wey, 1852.

³² Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe From the Renaissance to the Present*, 612-614.

³³ *Ibid.*, 441, 615.

principles and ideas from the French Revolution of 1789. These ideas include civil liberties, the rule of law, and a parliamentary monarchy form of government.

Liberals believed a parliamentary monarchy was the best way to secure the individual freedoms they cared the most about: private property and social order. Generally, liberals did not support a democratic form of government because they feared it would lead to Socialism.³⁴ Louis-Philippe ruled with these principles, and had support from the majority of the French people until around 1848.³⁵

By 1848 there was significant republican opposition to the July Monarchy ruled by Louis-Philippe.³⁶ Republicans had similar ideologies to liberals, in that they believed in the principles from the 1789 French Revolution; they differ, however, because they wanted a government chosen by popular sovereignty, free from the influence of the church. They also wanted free universal education, in order to provide knowledge with which the people could make informed decisions. They did not believe in an authoritarian or monarchical form of government. The republican movement was divided between three factions: moderate, radical, and revolutionary. Moderate republicans were similar to liberals because they believed strongly in the individual right of private property. Radical republicans supported general social reforms and a regime change. Revolutionary republicans wanted a violent reaction

³⁴ Roger Price, *Second French Empire* (Port Chester: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 291.

³⁵ Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe From the Renaissance to the Present*, 614-616.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 614.

to state repressions and supported the development of an egalitarian, socialist society.³⁷

Republicans began campaigning for electoral changes, and planned to host a reform banquet on February 22, 1848 in Paris. The government banned this meeting, and sent troops to ensure it did not convene. This led to widespread protests in Paris, which caused the patrolling troops to panic and open fire on the large unruly crowd, killing forty people. This event triggered even more outrage and unrest, and contributed to the abdication of Louis-Philippe, who fled France hoping his grandson, the Count of Paris, would take over. Instead, the Second French Republic (1848-1852) was declared.³⁸

After Louis-Philippe

After the abdication of Louis-Philippe, the Chamber of Deputies met and elected a provisional government, which declared universal male suffrage and abolished slavery in the French colonies. The Chamber of Deputies was the lower chamber of the French Parliament during the July Monarchy. There were many different political factions in France at this time, and they all wanted a different form of government to be established.³⁹ Legitimists were mostly nobles who supported a social hierarchy, with a divinely ordained king ruling at its pinnacle.⁴⁰ Orleanists

³⁷ Price, *Second French Empire*, 318.

³⁸ Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe From the Renaissance to the Present*, 616-617.

³⁹ Ibid., 617

⁴⁰ Price, *Second French Empire*, 272; Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe From the Renaissance to the Present*, 617.

wanted Louis-Philippe's grandson to rule France. Monarchists and some nobles wanted a new king, and people who remembered the legend of Napoleon wanted his nephew, Louis-Napoleon (1808-1873) in power.⁴¹

Republicans remained divided among the moderates, radicals, and revolutionaries, but still organized various republican and republican-socialist political clubs. These clubs appeared in response to the expanded voting rights granted to the people, and tried to convince men in the cities and countryside to stop supporting the monarchy.⁴²

France was also in the midst of an economic crisis, so the provisional government established a few social relief programs, including government-backed national workshops. Some groups, such as socialist-republicans, liked these programs because they believed in "right-to-work" legislation.⁴³ Other more conservative groups did not like these programs, because they did not think the government should have to employ people during an economic crisis. Despite the efforts of these political clubs, the elections in April produced a conservative majority with many monarchists in the Constituent Assembly.⁴⁴ The far left, which was unhappy with the election results tried to dissolve the Constituent Assembly and declare a social republic of the people, but failed. This attempt resulted in the arrest of many radical republicans by the provisional government.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe From the Renaissance to the Present*, 617.

⁴² Ibid., 617-618.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 618-619.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 626.

The new Constituent Assembly soon began running out of money, and ended the social relief programs that had recently been enacted. They also announced that all single men would be drafted, and that married workers would be sent to the provinces to find new jobs. This caused the June Days Rebellion, which lasted from June 23 to June 26. The rebelling workers were brutally put down by the French army and National Guard, which resulted in more than 1,500 people being killed and around 4,000 people deported. After the June Days Rebellion, the Constituent Assembly enacted several new measures restricting the freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly. They also closed down all political clubs. The presidential election finally occurred in November 1848, and Louis-Napoleon was elected with an overwhelming majority of the votes. He was declared the President of the Second Republic on December 10, 1848.⁴⁶

Louis-Napoleon and the Second Republic (1848-1852)

After the election of Louis-Napoleon, political, social, and economic stability began to return to France. Democratic-socialists began to expand support for their ideas of progressive taxation, higher wages for workers, abolition of the wine tax, the creation of credit banks for workers, and free obligatory primary education. These were popular ideas among the public as well, and in the 1849 elections one-third of the seats in the Constituent Assembly went to democratic-socialists.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Ibid., 626-628.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 638.

Louis-Napoleon was unhappy with these election results, and used them as an excuse to allege that there was a plot to threaten political order in France. He then enacted many new restrictive laws on the French public: symbols of the French Revolution, such as wearing red, were banned; freedom of assembly and association were limited; worker's associations were banned; National Guard units were disbanded; mayors and schoolteachers who supported the left were removed from their positions; cafés identified with the democratic-socialists were closed; and radical republican and socialist leaders were put in jail. In addition, a new residency requirement enacted in 1850 ended universal male suffrage and eliminated about one-third of the electorate. Most of the eliminated voters were from areas of France where Louis-Napoleon did not have much support. This widespread repression led to the creation of secret societies, made up of members who supported the establishment of a social republic.⁴⁸

Louis-Napoleon had a bigger problem than the underground opposition against him, however, because the constitution that was drawn up before his election limited all presidents to one term in office. Louis-Napoleon was getting close to this deadline and was not prepared to give up his presidency, so he began planning to seize the government. On December 2, 1851 he dissolved the Constituent Assembly. The secret societies tried to rise up and stop this from happening, but were defeated. For the most part, there was actually support from the French public for Louis-Napoleon's coup-d'état. After he completed his coup,

⁴⁸ Ibid., 638-640.

Louis-Napoleon proclaimed a new constitution. On December 2, 1852, Louis-Napoleon declared himself the emperor of France and took the name Napoleon III.⁴⁹

Napoleon III and the Second Empire (1852-1870)

Napoleon III began ruling the Second Empire with the goal of pulling the nation of France together. He promoted economic growth, created institutions to provide credit, encouraged rebuilding projects, and constructed more railways. Distinct priority was given to economic objectives, because Napoleon III believed that economic progress would improve everyone's living conditions. He also wanted to modernize and industrialize France, and believed that the government had to take a direct role in the promotion and execution of these developments.⁵⁰ He ruled with the help of ministers, and assigned prefects to local areas to help maintain control over the towns farther away from Paris. These ministers and prefects were under direct control of the government, and only the emperor could propose legislation. This allowed Napoleon III to centralize the government's economic and political power.⁵¹

Napoleon III also clamped down on political opposition and maintained press censorship. No newspaper dealing with political matters or the social economy could be funded without the government's approval, which had to be renewed with every new editor for the newspaper. Newspaper owners also had to pay a caution

⁴⁹ Ibid., 640.

⁵⁰ Plessis, *The Rise and Fall of the Second Empire*, 63.

⁵¹ Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe From the Renaissance to the Present*, 726.

tax and a stamp tax, which increased the prices of newspapers, and decreased their readership. Journalists were not allowed to comment on the proceedings of the Legislative Body, and a newspaper could be suspended after two warnings, even if they were not officially condemned. These restrictions were intended to curtail any press-instigated political opposition.⁵²

The Empire also sponsored official candidates for the Legislative Body, and hand picked the members of the Senate. The Legislative Body and the Senate formed the two houses of the National Assembly. This body had no real power, however, because Napoleon III was the only one to promulgate and enact laws and he authorized all public works. Additionally, every member of the National Assembly had to take an oath of allegiance to the Emperor, not the Empire, so the desires of Napoleon III came before the needs of the French public.⁵³ The Clergy was also given control of education under the Second Empire, so Napoleon III gained their support as well. Through all of these measures he was able to keep authoritarian control over the entire country, because it was very difficult for opposition movements to organize or become a prominent voice in France's repressed political climate.⁵⁴

Napoleon III also had a direct role in stimulating the economy through investments in public projects, which helped the development of different industries and created jobs. Wealthy bankers and industrialists who backed the regime

⁵² Plessis, *The Rise and Fall of the Second Empire*, 15.

⁵³ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁴ Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe From the Renaissance to the Present*, 726- 727.

allowed Napoleon III to finance some of his biggest initiatives. He encouraged the creation of mortgage banks, and the first one was opened in 1852. These banks sold shares to raise capital and gave loans to businessmen, which helped the development of different sectors in France. The metallurgical industry expanded considerably, and France's exports doubled between 1853 and 1864. The expanded railway network that ran throughout Paris and into neighboring countries (to be discussed in more detail later) helped the growth of France's exports, industries, and economy.⁵⁵

One of Napoleon III's biggest undertakings during his reign was the rebuilding of Paris, a project assigned to Baron George Haussmann (1809-1891), the prefect of the Seine, who was its director from 1853 to 1870. The rebuilding of Paris was a much-needed project because the city was dark, dirty, overcrowded, and disease-ridden. Napoleon III wanted to clean up the city and facilitate the expansion of commerce and industry with long wide boulevards lined with symmetrical apartment buildings. These boulevards also cut through the most areas prone to revolution. This made it more difficult for opposition groups to form, plan an uprising, and hide from the government. New aqueducts were also constructed to provide cleaner water, and more complete underground sewers were constructed to clean up the streets of Paris. Haussmann's rebuilding created many new jobs, but

⁵⁵ Ibid., 727.

also forced workers out into the countryside to live, because they could no longer afford to live in Paris because of high rents.⁵⁶

Napoleon III was helpful for the domestic growth of France, but was not good with international relations or foreign policy. In 1864, Napoleon III backed the reestablishment of the Mexican Monarchy, and helped install Austrian Archduke Maximilian (1832-1867) as its emperor. Three years later, there was an uprising in Mexico and Maximilian was executed. This defeat damaged Napoleon III's imperial goals, and France's international reputation.⁵⁷

In addition to experiencing international troubles, Napoleon III began experiencing internal troubles around 1868. Press censorship had been relaxed in 1864, and in 1868 freedom of assembly was allowed as well. This made it easier for opposition parties to form among monarchists, republicans, and socialists. Worker's strikes also became more frequent during these years.⁵⁸

While unrest inside France increased, Napoleon III continued to have difficulties with international relations. Through another series of foreign policy mistakes, Napoleon III provoked Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898) to declare war on France. This resulted in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), and a humiliating defeat for France; since France had better artillery than Prussia, they should have had the advantage. Prussia, however, had better generals than France, and was able to mobilize quickly. Napoleon III was captured by Prussia in Sedan, near the Belgian

⁵⁶ Ibid., 767-768.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 729.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 729-730.

border, and left for exile in Britain after his release. On September 4, 1870, a new French republic was declared.⁵⁹

The Expansion of French Railways Under the Second Empire

The Second Empire raised and contributed massive funds to Napoleon III's projects. Rather than raising taxes, however, Napoleon III made use of extensive loans and credit lines, which he borrowed against public assets, not private banks. While this resulted in massive debt for France, the strong central government inspired confidence in private businesses, which began contributing investments to the Emperor's projects. The Empire worked closely with business people to continue facilitating favorable investing conditions for them. The Empire also refrained from enacting or enforcing regulations on the railway industry, and promised capital to railway owners.⁶⁰

The government and corporate capitalists worked together to enlarge and improve the railway network in France. The State was in charge of building the infrastructure needed, such as utilities, and private companies were in charge of superstructures, such as tracks and stations. Railway companies were also granted extended operating leases. By this scheme, the government leases the land and the railroad contracts to private companies in exchange for a monthly rent. The government collects on this low rent, while the railway companies get all of the

⁵⁹ Ibid., 730-731.

⁶⁰ Plessis, *The Rise and Fall of the Second Empire*, 65.

profits from running the railroads. This made railways very profitable for these companies, and incentivized them to get involved in the expansion of France's railway network. In exchange, the government got an expanded railway line, and would eventually gain control of operating the railroads, which is what Napoleon III wanted.⁶¹

The main network lines were finished in 1858, and plans began for extended lines. The public, for the most part, wanted more railroads, so there was incentive for the government to build them. Local lines were built very quickly because of the great profits the industry made during this time. France's railway network increased rapidly from 3,248 kilometers of railway lines in 1851, to 16,465 kilometers of lines in 1869. By 1869, all main routes of the present day lines were completed.⁶²

The expanded railway network provided many benefits to the country and the people. The expanded train system allowed for increased traffic and transport volume, which made it easier for goods and people to travel. This allowed people to travel three times more than before the expanded train system, and permitted them to travel farther and more easily than before. The building and running of railways also created jobs, and allowed workers to live in the provinces and commute to work in the city.⁶³

⁶¹ Ibid., 83.

⁶² Ibid., 85.

⁶³ Ibid., 86-87.

Living conditions and consumer goods also improved for some people with the improved shipment of goods enabled by the expanded railway network. Quality building materials became available in distant markets, which improved building and living conditions in the provinces. The improved transport of food began the end of local food shortages, and lowered consumer prices. The railway network also helped unify France under one national market, and opened France to the international market. One negative of the national train system was that local markets were virtually eliminated, changing France's economic geography by shifting wealth to new areas at the expense of older wealthy areas.⁶⁴

Investments in the railway system from the government and private businesses, and the resulting prosperity, were a big driving force behind industrial expansion during the Second Empire. The rise of industries associated with railways, such as metallurgy and tourism, got the biggest boost from the new prosperity. There was also expanded competition in industrial innovations because every company wanted the best idea so they could gain the most capital. Industrial growth varied from region to region, but overall helped the modernization of France through the shift from small-scale to large-scale industry.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Ibid., 87

⁶⁵ Ibid., 88-93

After Napoleon III

The Second Empire ended with France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, and the capture of Napoleon III by the Prussians near the Belgian border. After this, a new provisional government became the Paris Commune (March 26- May 28, 1871). The Commune enacted several social reforms before its dissolution in May 1871. These reforms include the creation of a labor exchange, the abolition of night banking, and the establishment of nurseries for working mothers. They also gave preference to workers' establishments if the municipality needed any work done, and recognized women's rights and women's unions. The Commune had a lot of opposition, however, and ended with the Bloody Week, during which Prussian troops came to Paris from Versailles and arrested, tried, and executed anyone associated with the Commune. The Third French Republic (1870-1940) was established soon after.⁶⁶

Courbet served in the Commune government as the President of the Artist's Commission, which was created to protect works of art from destruction during those uncertain times. The Vendome Column, an old monument to the first Napoleon, was one of the artworks with which the Commission had to deal. Republicans wanted the Artist's Commission to destroy it completely. Before Courbet became president of the Commission, its members agreed with the Republicans' opinion, and were considering its destruction. Courbet, however,

⁶⁶ Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe From the Renaissance to the Present*, 732-734. And: Oliver Larkin, "Courbet in the Commune," *Science and Society* 5, no. 3 (1941): 256.

thought the column should be dismantled and its reliefs preserved. Regardless of the differing opinions about the Vendome Column, vandals destroyed it on May 16, 1871.⁶⁷

Courbet was arrested in June 1871 by the Versailles troops, because of his association with the Commune. He was tried by a military court for sedition, usurpation of public functions, and complicity in the destruction of the Vendome Column. He was convicted of these charges, and sentenced to six months in prison and fined five hundred francs. Shortly after his release in 1872, Courbet was declared financially responsible for the destruction of the Vendome Column by a civil court. He was charged 323,000 francs for the rebuilding of the Column. Rather than pay, however, Courbet left France for exile in Switzerland where he died in 1877.⁶⁸

Courbet was a staunch republican, who “on no account [could] approve passage of the emperor’s acts, nor ... lend [his] support to the men who have served him so well...”⁶⁹ This critical view of Napoleon III’s actions is also communicated in his landscape *The Valley of Les Puits-Noir* through the dark atmosphere and flatness of the image. This sweeping negative opinion of everything achieved by Napoleon III included the expanded railroads and increased tourism they created. These endeavors allowed Napoleon III to increasingly expand his influence and control into the countryside, which Courbet would have hated, especially if it occurred

⁶⁷ Larkin, “Courbet in the Commune,” 255-258.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 258-259.

⁶⁹ Chu, *Letters of Gustave Courbet*, 401. Letter from Courbet to Jules Simon, 1870.

around his hometown Ornans. Even though the expanded train lines likely made Courbet's life easier, because of his constant traveling, he still hated them because they were achieved under Napoleon III's rule. Courbet's involvement with the Commune reinforces his Republican views, which he never strayed from throughout his career.

COURBET'S ARTISTIC DEALINGS WITH THE SECOND EMPIRE

Courbet was already a prominent Realist painter at the beginning of the Second Empire, because of the large-scale genre paintings he produced during the Second Republic. Napoleon III wanted to use Courbet to expand the popularity of his regime and his policies, through strategic art commissions that would glorify the Second Empire. Important figures in the regime would approach artists, including Courbet, to convince them to become supporters of Napoleon III and show this support through their artworks.⁷⁰

Courbet himself was approached in 1853 by the Comte de Nieuwerkerke (1811-1892), the director of the Fine Arts Administration for the Second Empire, on behalf of Napoleon III. The impact of Courbet's earlier artworks made him an influential voice in the art world and to the public, so it was in the regime's best interests to try to control what he was saying. According to Courbet, the administration wanted him to produce a painting "worthy of his talent"⁷¹ for the Universal Exposition in 1855, which would be approved by the government.⁷² The Comte told Courbet to "be a good boy," "change [his] ideas," and "water [his] wine"

⁷⁰ Paul B. Crapo, "The Problematics of Artistic Patronage Under the Second Empire: Gustave Courbet's Involved Relations with the Regime of Napoleon III," 58, no. 2 (1995): 241.

⁷¹ Chu, *Letters of Gustave Courbet*, 115. Letter from Courbet to Alfred Bruyas, 1853.

⁷² Crapo, "The Problematics of Artistic Patronage Under the Second Empire," 248; Chu, *Letters of Gustave Courbet*, 115. Letter from Courbet to Alfred Bruyas, 1853.

in order to produce an acceptable painting, and that “the government [was] certainly flirting with [him]” more than any other artist at the time.⁷³

Courbet defiantly refused the government’s offer to become an officially sanctioned artist because he “had practiced painting not in order to make art for art’s sake, but rather to win [his] intellectual freedom.”⁷⁴ He did not “acknowledge any judges,” because he felt that he “was the sole judge of [his own] painting.”⁷⁵ He explained these principles to the Comte de Nieuwerkerke during a lunch at the government’s expense, when the Second Empire was still trying to garner Courbet’s artistic cooperation. The Comte responded to Courbet’s reaction by telling him that he was a striking example of people in the world “who were born to destroy the finest organizations...”⁷⁶

After this meeting, the Second Empire stopped pursuing Courbet as a possible artistic supporter of the regime, and instead just kept an eye on him. The government stayed involved in his career in a few ways. A few of Courbet’s more offensive artworks were occasionally censored, but some of his tamer ones were purchased for the imperial collection. This includes a landscape from which *The Valley of Les Puits-Noir* in the Art Institute of Chicago was later copied.⁷⁷ Additionally,

⁷³ Chu, *Letters of Gustave Courbet*, 117. Letter from Courbet to Alfred Bruyas, 1853.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 116.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 283-Footnote number 2; Crapo, “The Problematics of Artistic Patronage Under the Second Empire,” 245-247; Chu, *Nineteenth Century European Painting* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2006), 286.

Courbet was allowed prominent showings in the Salons, even if some of his artworks inspired public outcry.⁷⁸

Courbet could have never been an artistic supporter of Napoleon III because he was “not only a socialist but a democrat and a Republican as well – in a word, a partisan of all the revolution and above all, a Realist. ...for Realist means a sincere lover of the honest truth.”⁷⁹ He also believed that the artist, not the state, served as the primary vehicle of social progress. He wanted to use his art to educate the public, amend social issues, and help the progress of society.⁸⁰ If Courbet had become an imperial-backed artist, then he would not have been able to educate the public through depicting the truth, because the government would have control over what he got to paint. Courbet rightfully believed that no artist could create real art with the constraints placed on them by the Second Empire, because its art institutions were in place to benefit the reputation of the regime, not to benefit the career of the artist.⁸¹

Additionally, he did not agree with the “abominable”⁸² Second Empire, so he would not have been able to honestly depict any of its positive aspects while remaining true to his intent as an artist. Courbet was not going to stop using didactic imagery to critique every aspect of the Second Empire. Rather than sell out and gain its support, he relied on private patronage to maintain his artistic

⁷⁸ Crapo, “The Problematics of Artistic Patronage Under the Second Empire,” 245-247.

⁷⁹ Chu, *Letters of Gustave Courbet*, 103. Letter to the editor of *Le Messager de l’assemblée*, 1851.

⁸⁰ Crapo, “The Problematics of Artistic Patronage Under the Second Empire,” 248.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁸² Chu, *Letters of Gustave Courbet*, 401. Letter from Courbet to Jules Simon, 1870.

freedom.⁸³ Courbet exerted his artistic freedom for the rest of his career, occasionally running into trouble with the Second Empire's censors.

Even after refusing the government's offer to produce a painting "worthy of his talent,"⁸⁴ Courbet still produced paintings for the 1855 Universal Exposition, the most notable of which is *The Studio of the Painter: a Real Allegory Summing up Seven Years of my Artistic and Moral Life* (fig. 6).⁸⁵ This painting is reminiscent of images he produced during the Second Republic because of its representations of men and women from all parts of society, and its biting social commentary about the state of the regime.⁸⁶ Courbet depicts himself in the center of this scene, flanked by a nude woman and a young boy, who are both watching him paint. To the left are Courbet's supporters and friends, whom he describes as the "world of commonplace life."⁸⁷ Napoleon III himself is depicted in this group, seated next to some dogs; this covert inclusion of Napoleon III among the dark, dirty, and desperate looking working class shows Courbet's view that Napoleon III was a betrayer of the Republic. He felt that the Emperor had forgotten about the difficulty the working class faced everyday, which he promised to focus on and fix when he first came to power.⁸⁸

⁸³ Crapo, "The Problematics of Artistic Patronage Under the Second Empire," 252-253.

⁸⁴ Chu, *Letters of Gustave Courbet*, 115. Letter from Courbet to Alfred Bruyas, 1853.

⁸⁵ Gustave Courbet. *The Studio of the Painter: a Real Allegory Summing up Seven Years of my Artistic and Moral Life*, oil on canvas, 142" x 235". 1855. Paris: Musée d'Orsay. More information about this painting can be found in *Courbet Reconsidered*, exhibition catalogue by Sarah Faunce and Linda Nochlin (New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1988).

⁸⁶ Crapo, "The Problematics of Artistic Patronage Under the Second Empire," 250.

⁸⁷ Linda Nochlin, "Courbet's Real Allegory: Rereading the Painter's Studio," in *Courbet*, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2007), 153.

⁸⁸ Crapo, "The Problematics of Artistic Patronage Under the Second Empire," 249-250.

Courbet includes himself in the center of the image, painting a landscape scene. The inclusion of himself painting this landscape in such a political scene shows that Courbet thought highly of this genre of painting. When Courbet's more overtly political genre paintings began to attract too much controversy, he turned to the genre of landscapes to communicate his critical views about the Second Empire. *The Valley of Les Puits-Noir* is an example of Courbet using formal elements of landscape paintings to imply his critiques of the government.

The Studio of the Painter is a confusing image that scholars are still debating, so it is doubtful that the Second Empire fully understood the derisive political message Courbet concealed under the allegory of this painting. Regardless, it was rejected from the 1855 Universal Exposition. This rejection outraged Courbet, who then withdrew all of his accepted images from the exhibition, and set up his own "Pavilion of Realism" down the street from the main exposition hall.⁸⁹ This is an instance of Courbet reacting against the regime, when he felt they were repressing his artistic freedom. Courbet clearly wanted to get his message to the public, and was able to get enough money to create his own pavilion to showcase his works. Later in his career, however, actions like this became prohibitively expensive for him, so he would need to find a more subtle way to depict his message to the public. Landscape paintings allowed him to achieve this.

Courbet's career was closely watched by the regime, and sometimes by Napoleon III himself, who personally prevented Courbet from receiving the top

⁸⁹ Nochlin "The Painter's Studio," 184.

prize at the Salon of 1861. In the Salon of 1861, Courbet's painting *Fighting Stags*⁹⁰ was a huge success, and he was led to believe that the government would award him the cross of the Legion of Honor, the top prize at these shows, because of its positive reception. At the awards ceremony, however, he was only given a second-class medal. According to rumors, which Courbet believed, it was the Emperor himself who took Courbet's name off of the list of possible recipients.⁹¹ This could have been retaliation from the Empire for all of the scathing critiques Courbet had included in earlier paintings. It also got across the message that the government was keeping an eye on his career.

This strict government censorship became most apparent in 1863, when Courbet submitted *Return from the Conference*⁹² to the Salon. The anti-clerical content of this image, which Courbet produced to test the limits of the Second Empire, was overtly controversial. It was ultimately censored from both the Salon and the Salon of Refusals.⁹³ Ironically, this incident probably attracted more attention to Courbet from the public, and may have helped him make some money from his other artworks. This was not the last time Courbet was suppressed by the government; *Venus and Psyche* was censored the very next year for impropriety.

After an entire career of imbuing his figural paintings with negative messages about

⁹⁰ Gustave Courbet. *Fighting Stags*, oil on canvas, 11' 6" x 16' 6". 1861. Paris: Musée d'Orsay. More information about this painting can be found in Michael Fried's *Courbet's Realism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990).

⁹¹ Ibid., 252.

⁹² Gustave Courbet. *Return from the Conference*, oil on canvas. 1863. Destroyed by owner in 1909. More information about this painting can be found in Paul B. Crapo, "The Problematics of Artistic Patronage Under the Second Empire: Gustave Courbet's Involved Relations with the Regime of Napoleon III," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 58, no. 2 (1995).

⁹³ Crapo, "The Problematics of Artistic Patronage Under the Second Empire," 254.

the government, they almost automatically would be considered political. The Fine Arts Administration itself even became hesitant to buy paintings from Courbet; for fear that he would alter his paintings to make them more offensive between the sale and the shipment of the image.⁹⁴

The reputation Courbet built for himself as a socialist painter who used images to critique the government backfired in regards to his figural paintings, which were being looked at closely by the government, as is evident in their occasional censoring. This necessitated that Courbet shift from using figural and genre scenes to depict his critical views to using landscapes, such as *The Valley of Les Puits-Noir*, if he wanted the public to be able to see them. Landscapes are historically a more neutral genre, so Courbet would have been able to insert his messages into them without arousing immediate suspicion. Courbet was adamant about using his art to educate the masses and inspire social change, and remained “a sincere lover of the honest truth,” throughout his career.⁹⁵ The truth to Courbet was that Napoleon III was an “unspeakable” shame to Paris.⁹⁶

Courbet himself admitted that he spent twenty years doing “whatever was in [his] power to destroy him [Napoleon III].”⁹⁷ This means that Courbet would not have given up critiquing the government just because they were censoring his messages; he would have found a new way to convey his views through his

⁹⁴ Ibid., 258.

⁹⁵ Chu, *Letters of Gustave Courbet*, 103. Letter to the editor of *Le Messager de l'assemblée*, 1851.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 453. Letter to Juliette Courbet, 1872.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

paintings. The formal elements of landscape images allowed Courbet to maintain his career, deliver his message to the public, and avoid the Second Empire's censors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

T. J. Clark, Ann Wagner, Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, Linda Nochlin, Michael Fried, and Klaus Herding have all written about the possible meanings of Courbet's landscape paintings, especially those after 1855. My goal here is to summarize these scholars' readings and interpretations of Courbet's landscapes, and then add my own conclusions to this group of paintings. I will argue that Courbet uses his landscapes to convey critical views about the improved industry and transportation capabilities under the Second Empire in France because they allowed Napoleon III to expand his influence into the countryside. This argument has not been considered by previous scholarship, which often overlooks important social and political aspects of the time when these paintings were produced.

T.J. Clark is the most dismissive of Courbet's later body of work. In his book *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*, Clark dismisses Courbet's later landscapes in one sentence. He says that in the 1860's the landscape tradition "went dead in his hands, nature became mechanical."⁹⁸ In addition, Clark argues that Courbet's paintings are not done in "politics proper,"⁹⁹ but that it is

⁹⁸ T. J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 155.

⁹⁹ Ibid. 161.

possible to read his paintings as political. Clark then assumes that Courbet probably accepted a political reading of his landscapes.¹⁰⁰

Clark's dismissal of Courbet's works from after 1860 disregards an important period in Courbet's artistic career. He ignores the possibility that Courbet could have been using these seemingly neutral scenes to express an opinion about Napoleon III's regime. Censorship of the media and artworks was constantly changing in the nineteenth century, but it became "outright oppressive" under the Second Empire.¹⁰¹ After an entire career of being an outspoken dissenter against the regime, it makes sense that Courbet would need to be more covert about his negative political opinions. Landscape painting provided Courbet with the perfect vehicle to conceal his critical views.

Ann Wagner also has a somewhat dismissive opinion of Courbet's landscapes. She does, however, acknowledge their importance in Courbet's body of work and speculates on their intended purpose, which Clark does not attempt at all. Wagner argues in her article, "Courbet's Landscapes and Their Market," that Courbet knew the popularity of his landscape scenes and exploited that popularity by increasing his production of them to make money. She asserts that Courbet produced landscapes for the urban bourgeoisie, who wanted a calm nature scene to view in their homes to serve as an escape from the industrialized Paris in which they lived.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 155-156.

¹⁰¹ Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, "Salon Rhetoric," in *The Most Arrogant Man in France: Gustave Courbet and the Nineteenth-Century Media Culture*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 75.

Although Courbet departed from accepted conventions of landscape painting, his scenes were still very popular with patrons.

Wagner concludes that the popularity of Courbet's landscapes comes from their intended purpose of being absorbed, not read, by the viewer.¹⁰² This means that rather than standing in front of a painting and contemplating its intended meaning, the viewer can look at the painting and transport himself or herself into the surroundings depicted. This gives the viewer an emotional experience with the painting, rather than an intellectual one, which makes the image relaxing and pleasing to look at, especially for a tired industrialist or city dweller.

According to Wagner, a hardworking Parisian during this industrial age would not have wanted an image they would have to sit down and analyze in order to understand or enjoy. Courbet capitalized on the market for a more lethargic viewer, who would want to relax in front of the image, and transport him or herself into the serene surroundings the painting depicts. Wagner also argues that economics, not politics were Courbet's motivations for producing these images. Having assigned this motive, Wagner thinks that Courbet's later landscapes are less successful than his earlier works.¹⁰³

I think Wagner's argument does not accurately account for the political history of these times or Courbet's outspoken personality. Although he was aware of the popularity of his landscapes in the market, I do not believe that he would

¹⁰² Wagner, "Courbet's Landscapes and Their Market," 426.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 429.

completely abandon his point of view as an artist in order to make money. This is evident in his rejection of the Comte de Nieuwerkerke's offer to produce a government-sanctioned painting for the 1855 Universal Exposition. These landscapes show a compromise between Courbet's politics and his need to make money because he retreated to a more popular genre – landscapes – which allowed him to mask his political views by hiding them behind countryside imagery. Courbet would have known that people wanted to be absorbed by landscape paintings, instead of having to read and decipher a meaning from them, because of the success of well-established landscape traditions, such as the Barbizon School. While there may have been an economic motivation for Courbet's production of landscapes, and even copying of his more popular scenes such as *The Valley of Les Puits-Noir* in the Art Institute of Chicago, he would not have completely divorced himself from the politics so visible in his earlier paintings.

Petra ten-Doesschate Chu also talks about the market for Courbet's landscape paintings in her book *The Most Arrogant Man in France: Gustave Courbet and the Nineteenth-Century Media Culture*. She has a similar argument to Wagner: that Courbet produced his landscapes for the art market. She goes one step further, however, and argues that Courbet produced different types of landscapes to appeal to different groups of people. This allowed him to broaden his patron base, and make more money.¹⁰⁴ She points out that he created images of specific places with

¹⁰⁴ Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, "Packaging and Marketing Nature," in *The Most Arrogant Man in France: Gustave Courbet and the Nineteenth Century Media Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 146.

local meanings and significance for people of certain areas, like the Franche-Comté region.¹⁰⁵ He painted images of industry coexisting with nature, such as *Lock in the Loue River*,¹⁰⁶ which depicts what looks like a mill off to the left of a large river that is surrounded by lush green trees and a large open sky. According to Chu, images like this would not have been for urban Parisian patrons, who did not want to see industry appearing in nature; they were more likely for countryside patrons.¹⁰⁷ He also painted specific places with an emphasis on the effect of the landscape (*payssages d'effet*) being conveyed to the viewers; these were the most popular with urban Parisians.¹⁰⁸ Chu speculates that Courbet got the idea to market different types of landscape images to different types of people from the press, which had different journal types targeted to different audiences.¹⁰⁹ Her argument that Courbet had a sub-category of landscapes carrying specific meanings for specific people accepts that he was capable of conveying a meaning through his landscapes.

Linda Nochlin acknowledges the existing dispute between scholars about Courbet's landscapes, and adds her own reading of them in her essay "Courbet and His Territory: How Landscape Means." She understands the argument that Wagner makes, but does not think that Courbet's later landscapes are less successful than his earlier works just because they were produced for patrons, or the market in general.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 151.

¹⁰⁶ Gustave Courbet. *Lock in the Loue River*, oil on canvas, 21¼" x 25¾". 1865. Nationalgalerie, Berlin. More information about this painting can be found in Petra ten-Doesschate Chu's book *The Most Arrogant Man in France: Gustave Courbet and the Nineteenth-Century Media Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

¹⁰⁷ Chu, "Packaging and Marketing Nature," 152.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 169.

She also agrees with Chu that his landscapes vary in their production and quality, but she argues that this shows a change in Courbet's approach to the areas that he depicts, rather than specialization for different types of markets. Nochlin, however, ignores a possible reason for the variance in Courbet's landscape's quality that Wagner brings up: Courbet would sign the works of his students in order to keep up with demand for his images.¹¹⁰ She acknowledges, like Chu, that certain paintings probably did have a political meaning; especially the paintings that Chu argues were made for locals of a certain area. This would include images depicting specific places in the France-Comté or Jura region, which would have had a particular meaning to the locals. *The Oak at Flagey*¹¹¹ is an example of this type of image because it depicts a specific tree with political and historical significance to the people in that area.

After this, Nochlin offers her own interpretation of Courbet's landscapes: that they draw an analogy between nature and the female body. Nochlin argues that when there is no easy or overt political meaning from Courbet's landscapes, they should be read as depictions of the female body. She points out that there was an artistic tradition of associating landscapes and women's bodies, and that Courbet would have been aware of this tradition. Nochlin also notes that some of Courbet's most prominent patrons commissioned erotic images of the female body and it makes sense that these two styles, landscape and female nude, would somehow

¹¹⁰ Wagner, "Courbet's Landscapes and Their Market," 411.

¹¹¹ Gustave Courbet. *The Oak at Flagey*, oil on canvas, 35" x 43.3". 1864. Tokyo: Murauchi Art Museum. More information about this painting can be found in Linda Nochlin's essay "Courbet and his Territory: How Landscape Means" in *Courbet* 2007.

merge.¹¹² I claim that if nature can be read as a woman, then it can be read as a political statement as well. Less overt depictions of Courbet's political dissent shows his ability to refine and tailor his style in order to make his works sellable, while not compromising his politics.

The main argument Michael Fried makes in *Courbet's Realism*, about Courbet's landscapes is that they were explicitly going against the tradition of absorption established by earlier landscape painting. This is the opposite of Wagner's argument, which is that these paintings are meant to be absorbed, not read. He argues that Courbet's landscapes are absorbed in themselves, thereby forcing the viewer out of the scene. Fried also acknowledges the possible association between these paintings and women's bodies, which is the argument that Nochlin makes. He also claims that Courbet's politics are not a part of his landscape paintings.

Fried bases these arguments largely on the formal elements of Courbet's landscape paintings.¹¹³ This method does not fully consider the social and historical climate during Courbet's career. Overall, I agree with Fried's argument that these landscapes are not meant to be absorbed by the viewer, because of their general flatness. I do, however, think there is still a political message behind them. Making such landscapes was a strategy that allowed Courbet to continue painting images that were popular in the market, without giving up on his political beliefs. Although

¹¹² Nochlin, "Courbet and his Territory."

¹¹³ Michael Fried, *Courbet's Realism*.

these images are not controversial and overtly political like many of his earlier paintings, they still carry a message of political critique in a more subdued tone.

Klaus Herding also weighs in on possible readings and meanings of Courbet's landscapes in *Courbet: to Venture Independence*. Herding departs from Fried's methods, and considers the social history of the time in conjunction with the landscapes Courbet was producing. Herding talks about the Barbizon school as well as Courbet, and their mutual distaste for the growing industrialization happening in Paris during the Second Empire. He mentions that landscapes and nature scenes were growing in popularity in the market, and depicting them helped keep Courbet out of trouble with the government. His main argument is that Courbet wanted to record nature before industrialization began to take it over, and that these landscapes show Courbet's acceptance of the technological advances of the Second Empire, while defying Bonapartist centralism by portraying the individuality of different areas in France.¹¹⁴

I think that Courbet did not approve of the industrial advances of the Second Empire. Rather, by highlighting the individuality of different areas, and depicting these spaces in a flat manner, Courbet was reacting against Napoleon III's intrusion into nature. Specifically, the transportation that allowed tourism and easy travel to previously remote areas would have probably bothered Courbet. These landscapes

¹¹⁴ Klaus Herding, "Equality and Authority in Courbet's Landscape Painting," in *Courbet: to Venture Independence*, trans. John William Gabriel, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

were also not painted on-site, so the preservation of the true look of these locations was probably of less importance to Courbet than the message he used them to send.

While the Barbizon painters wanted to depict scenes for the viewer to retreat into, Courbet keeps the viewer out of his spaces. He used his landscapes to show discontent with the growth and expansion of the Second Empire, which he did by creating flat images that offer no space for the viewer to access. This flatness forces the viewer to realize that he or she cannot transcend reality and retreat into this natural world. The industrialization happening under the Second Empire was quickly eliminating pristine natural locations, so even if the viewer were to physically travel into nature, there would be no undisturbed land to experience. Courbet was aware of the transformation happening during this time, and used the popular genre of landscape painting to show what increased industrialization was doing. He was not, as Herding suggests, passively documenting specific areas before they disappeared.

Overall, existing scholarship does not touch on the idea that Courbet was using his landscapes to communicate a specific political message. Courbet did not hide his opposition to the Second Empire, as evident in his artworks and his personal letters. It does not make sense that he would omit all of his political views from his entire body of landscapes. I argue that the formal choices he made in his landscape paintings, as typified by *The Valley of Les Puits-Noir*, critiques the government like his genre paintings, but through different means. This political

motivation becomes even clearer when compared to contemporary scenes by Barbizon School painters.

COURBET AND THE BARBIZON SCHOOL: Landscapes and Ideologies

The most popular landscape paintings during Courbet's lifetime were those of the Barbizon school. The Barbizon School was a group of painters who retreated into the countryside of France, specifically the Forest of Fontainebleau, to escape increasingly industrialized and materialistic cities like Paris. They used their landscape paintings to advocate for others to return to the countryside as well, which they achieved through bright and pleasing lighting, and depth that makes their painted scenes look as though they could go on forever. Courbet, on the other hand, created dark and flat compositions that prevent the viewer from physically entering the scene, or having a role within it; his paintings give no implication that the nature scene continues beyond the canvas. These formal elements display the fundamental difference in messages put forth by Courbet and the Barbizon School. Whereas the Barbizon landscapes advocate for a return to nature in order to escape Napoleonic influence and industrialization, Courbet's landscapes suggest that there is no escaping the reach of the Second Empire.

The Barbizon School and their Landscape Paintings

Courbet's landscapes of areas in the Franche-Comté, especially those around his hometown of Ornans, depict real places in the French countryside. These areas are depicted as untouched by the Second Empire and its industrial expansion, which

was a characteristic that made Courbet's landscapes popular in the art market.¹¹⁵ At first glance, these images depict serene countryside locations that would offer urban Parisians an escape into nature. Upon further investigation, however, the flatness and gloomy atmosphere of these images becomes apparent, and there is no place for the viewer to mentally place him or herself within the image. Rather than inviting the viewer to retreat and relax in this nature scene, Courbet's landscapes exclude the viewer entirely. This suggests that Courbet did not think nature was a cure for Napoleonic oppression, unlike the Barbizon painters.¹¹⁶

The Barbizon School became established and successful while Courbet's career was at its height. The Barbizon School was active from about 1830 to 1870 in France, and was primarily responsible for the elevation of pure landscapes as an accepted genre of painting.¹¹⁷ Barbizon is a small town about forty miles southeast of Paris, located to the side of the Forest of Fontainebleau; it did not even have an inn until 1822. The French train system made Barbizon an easy ride from the city, an advent that came with Napoleon III's expansion of the railway system.¹¹⁸

Before the Barbizon school, the only types of landscapes that were accepted within the rigid structure of the French Academy were historic or poetic landscape paintings, which were highly idealized images, not direct transcripts of nature.¹¹⁹ These images were usually painted in the Neoclassical tradition and were heavily

¹¹⁵ Ann Wagner, "Courbet's Landscapes and Their Market," 419-420.

¹¹⁶ Herding, "Equality and Authority in Courbet's Landscape Painting," 77.

¹¹⁷ Bouret, *The Barbizon School and 19th Century French Landscape Painting*, 10, 243.

¹¹⁸ Amory, "The Barbizon School."

¹¹⁹ Ibid.; Bouret, *The Barbizon School and 19th Century French Landscape Painting*, 12.

based on Italian Renaissance, Northern Renaissance, and Baroque art. Claude Lorraine and Nicholas Poussin were key examples for nineteenth century French artists to follow.¹²⁰ Some artists associated with the Barbizon school were Théodore Rousseau (1812-1867), Narcisse Diaz de la Peña (1807-1876), Jean-Francois Millet (1814-1875), Camille Corot (1796-1875), and Charles-Francois Daubigny (1817-1878).¹²¹

Like Courbet, artists of the Barbizon School intentionally departed from the established norms of painting during their time. For the majority of their careers, these artists made little to no money because of their rebellion against the French Academy and its standards. Direct images of nature were not recognized by the Academy as an art form on their own; they were instead regarded as studies for a more complete image. This made it nearly impossible for Barbizon artists to gain entrance into the French Salons, which prevented them from attaining much recognition, or making any money until 1848.¹²²

The techniques employed by the Barbizon school in their paintings, as well as the messages they conveyed, impacted Courbet's later landscape paintings.

Barbizon artists would paint on site, outside, directly from nature, rather than simply sketch outside and finish an image in a studio. This process is known as painting *en plein air*.¹²³ They also utilized a more liberated painting technique.

Rousseau would dab unmixed paint directly on to the canvas, to let the viewer's eye

¹²⁰ Amory, "The Barbizon School."

¹²¹ Ibid.; Bouret, *The Barbizon School and 19th Century French Landscape Painting*.

¹²² Bouret, *The Barbizon School and 19th Century French Landscape Painting*, 11-12.

¹²³ Ibid., 89.

blend the colors together, and to allow for greater intensity of color than would be achieved with a flat application of pigment.¹²⁴ This is one of the ways that these painters played with the effects of light and color. Focus on varying effects of light is a characteristic of Barbizon paintings. These artists would experiment with changes of atmosphere and light by painting the same place at different times of the day, allowing only the light effects to distinguish the images that were produced.¹²⁵ In this way, they were the precursors to Impressionism.

The Barbizon school and their *plein air* painting process made considerable strides in terms of practice and execution in the years leading up to 1848. The lack of Barbizon representation in French Salons continued, however, because of the arbitrary process by which images were chosen for display. There were no artists on the Salon jury; instead it was made up of entrenched Academicians familiar with painting, sculpture, engraving, architecture, and music, who had trouble agreeing with each other in terms of what to accept and reject. These men did not allow pure landscape painting to be admitted, because it was not a recognized art form by the Academy's standards.¹²⁶ With no one present on the jury to advocate for them, the Barbizon school was continually left out of these large exhibitions.

This situation for the Barbizon painters did not change until the 1848 Revolution, when the Salon selection process was changed. Now, because jury members were elected, artists gained seats and were able to take part in the

¹²⁴ Ibid., 161, 41.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 162-163, 223.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 115-117, 12.

artwork selection process. As a result, the 1848 Salon displayed many landscapes, including ones from Barbizon artists.¹²⁷ This representation increased in future Salons, which elevated the status of the literal landscape or landscape portrait in the art world to an accepted subject for paintings.¹²⁸ At the same time as the rise of Barbizon representation in Salons, Courbet began to display some of his most famous Realist works, such as *The Burial at Ornans*.¹²⁹ The growing presence of Courbet, along with the growing popularity of the Barbizon school, sped up the decline of Romanticism as a favored art movement, and led to the development of a separate Realist school of painting led by Courbet.¹³⁰ The prosperity of the Barbizon painters began to grow with their increased notoriety, which culminated at the Universal Exposition of 1855. Barbizon artists made up a huge portion of the Universal Exposition, with Théodore Rousseau alone displaying thirteen paintings. This large display cemented the Barbizon as an accepted movement, with Rousseau as its leader.¹³¹

The Barbizon School painters were unhappy with the industrialization France was undergoing, and used their paintings to glorify a rustic country life to try to attract people back to living in nature.¹³² Rousseau advocated for a total identification of man with nature, in order to “convey a real world which enfolds

¹²⁷ Ibid., 137-138.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 165.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 170; Gustave Courbet. *The Burial at Ornans*, oil on canvas, 10' 4" x 21' 8". 1849-1859. More information about this painting can be found in T.J. Clark *Image of the People*.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 174.

¹³¹ Ibid., 176-178.

¹³² Ibid., 17.

you in all its inevitability.”¹³³ Landscapes became not just a view of a scene, but also an expression of a state of mind prompted by a response to the scene. In this way, Barbizon painters viewed art as a way to express positive and negative thoughts and feelings.¹³⁴ Similarly to Courbet, they recognized peasants as real people who were suffering in an emerging industrial society. Jean-Francois Millet’s work in particular highlights the work of the peasantry, although sometimes with romantic undertones that made them seem more heroic and less miserable than in reality. Courbet also depicted the peasantry, but usually in a more unflattering light, making them look dirty and undignified. This tendency made his images more controversial than those of the Barbizon.

The Barbizon painters rebelled against an increasingly industrial civilization. These painters were dissatisfied with contemporary society because of political instability, exploitation of natural resources, destruction of forests, displacement of the peasant population, and the disappearance of rustic existence.¹³⁵ They celebrated the geography of the countryside in their paintings, as an effort to attract more people into it, and away from increasingly urban Paris.

The Lake (fig. 7)¹³⁶ by Corot typifies a Barbizon landscape that invites the viewer to retreat into it. The atmosphere of the scene is light and airy, and the foreground is open so that the viewer may enter, with the middle ground consisting

¹³³ Ibid., 148, 16.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 13-14.

¹³⁵ Robinson, *La Vie Moderne*, 19.

¹³⁶ Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot. *The Lake*, 1861, oil on canvas, 52 3/8" x 62". New York: the Frick Collection. More information about this painting can be found in *Art in The Frick Collection: Paintings, Sculpture, Decorative Arts*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996.

of several trees lined up next to each other. The background shows a large lake and a grassy area beyond it. The center of the canvas, however, has two trees that lean into each other and create a triangular opening, almost like a door, for the viewer to pass through and experience the beautiful lakeside. There is also a depiction of a person to the left of this opening, with his back to the viewer so he can stare off into the vast expanse of nature. This implies a specific role for the viewer, further enticing him or her into the scene. The Barbizon painters retreated into nature themselves, in order to avoid being absorbed by the increasingly materialistic society that Paris was becoming. They thought everyone should do the same.¹³⁷

These painters had a disdain for the society they were living in, as well as a total passion for undisturbed nature. These two characteristics combined to form the conventions associated with the Barbizon school, but also aided in the destruction of the countryside they loved.¹³⁸ Courbet had similar views about France's industrialization as the painters of the Barbizon school, but differed in the messages put forth by his landscape paintings. He opted for a more exclusionary depiction and pessimistic view about the status of the countryside, rather than an open depiction and optimistic view of the countryside. Where Barbizon landscapes advocate for escaping industrial expansion by retreating into nature, Courbet's landscapes suggest there is no escaping the expansion of the Second Empire.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 17-22.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 24.

After the Universal Exposition of 1855, the popularity of Barbizon painting took off. By 1859, the movement had spread all over Europe and to America, resulting in more artists joining the circle and moving to the town of Barbizon.¹³⁹ The flocking of all of these new artists to Barbizon, as well as the popularity of the images they produced, made the area an increased tourist destination instead of a quiet retreat for painters.¹⁴⁰ The increased popularity of the area contributed to the re-planning of the entire forest of Fontainebleau by Claude-Francois Denecourt, the benefactor of Fontainebleau, and the author of its first travel guide.¹⁴¹ The Forest was slowly developed to become a tourist attraction, except for Rousseau's favorite giant oak trees, which the Emperor protected with an imperial decree in 1853. The entire Forest was redesigned with paths, trams, grand views, and a few monuments, to attract more visitors.¹⁴² The amount of wood and stones in the Forest also made it an important place for French commodity items, because its wood could be used for building, and its stones could be used for paving.¹⁴³ The abundance of resources in the forest probably contributed an additional economic incentive, in addition to the tourism incentive, to Fontainebleau's redesign.

The Barbizon painters, especially Rousseau, did not approve of destroying the area to promote tourism, but their reverence of the place combined with the

¹³⁹ Ibid., 229, 209, 215.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 233-234.

¹⁴¹ *Archives Départementales de Seine-et-Marne*, Claude-Francois Denecourt (1788-1875), accessed March 15, 2013, <http://archives.seine-et-marne.fr/claude-francois-denecourt-1788-1875>.

¹⁴² Ibid., 232; Amory, "The Barbizon School."; Kimberly Jones, "Landscapes, Legends, Souvenirs, Fantasies," in *In the Forest of Fontainebleau: Painters and Photographers from Corot to Monet*, Kimberly Jones, Simon Kelly, Sarah Kennel, and Helga Aurisch, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 18.

¹⁴³ Jones, "Landscapes, Legends, Souvenirs, Fantasies," 6.

popularity of their paintings depicting the area, contributed to the forest's repurposing.¹⁴⁴ Courbet was a frequent visitor to the Forest of Fontainebleau as well, and would have seen this episode unfold.¹⁴⁵ He probably had a similar negative reaction to the redesign of the Forest as the Barbizon school, considering he could not approve of "passage of the emperor's acts," and would not have wanted a similar fate for the areas near his hometown.¹⁴⁶ The changes made to the Forest of Fontainebleau probably influenced Courbet's formal choices in his own landscapes, because he would not want a similar fate for Ornans. Courbet made his landscapes flat, dark, and menacing, to keep tourists away from his hometown.

The motives and messages behind the Barbizon school's landscape paintings were different from those of Courbet, both in their reasons for turning to nature and the messages they tried to convey using nature. The Barbizon school advocated for retreating into nature to escape the industrialization of Paris, and used their inviting landscape images to convey this message. Ironically, the popularity of the Barbizon school and its message led to the destruction of the Forest of Fontainebleau, and the town of Barbizon, which Barbizon painters loved so much. Courbet also did not approve of the industrialization efforts undertaken by Napoleon III. He did not believe, however, that industrialization could be escaped by running away into nature. This more pessimistic view is expressed through the gloomy atmosphere, dark lighting, and the general flatness, of his landscape images, as seen in *The Valley*

¹⁴⁴ Amory, "The Barbizon School."

¹⁴⁵ Bouret, *The Barbizon School and 19th Century French Landscape Painting*, 143.

¹⁴⁶ Chu, ed., *Letters of Gustave Courbet*, 401. Letter from Courbet to Jules Simon, 1870.

of *Les Puits-Noir*, which was painted after Fontainebleau was repurposed for tourism.

Barbizon landscapes helped lead to both Realism and Impressionism. They elevated landscape painting to a popular and accepted art form, which allowed Courbet to use the genre as a way to make money, while still depicting his anger towards the Second Empire. The Barbizon study of the effects of light on the same scene during different times of the day also influenced future Impressionists. Monet especially learned from this technique, which allowed him and other Impressionists to depict landscape scenes with their own experiments on the effects of light.¹⁴⁷

The Valley of Les Puits-Noir

The Valley of Les Puits-Noir (fig. 3)¹⁴⁸ is an example of a local landscape painted by Courbet in order to express his views about the Second Empire and its expansion into the countryside. The subject on its own, a stream near Courbet's hometown of Ornans, is an innocent one; however, the techniques Courbet uses in its rendering makes the scene gloomy, dark, and flat. The overall atmosphere of this landscape, as well as in the many others he painted of areas near Ornans, communicate a negative outlook for the future of places like this.

¹⁴⁷ Bouret, *The Barbizon School and 19th Century French Landscape Painting*, 9, 89, 163.

¹⁴⁸ Gustave Courbet. *The Valley of Les Puits-Noir*, oil on canvas, 43 ¾" x 54 ¼". 1868. Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago. More information about this painting can be found in The Art Institute of Chicago, *Paintings in the Art Institute of Chicago: A Catalogue of the Picture Collection* (Chicago, 1961) pp. 108,239 (ill.).

The Valley of Les Puits-Noir depicts a stream surrounded by trees, loose boulders, and large rock formations. The canvas is landscape-oriented, but the struggle between the verticality of the composition and the horizontal orientation of the canvas makes the painting feel more like a square, rather than a rectangle. The stream in the center of the image captures the eye and guides it back into the painting, until it disappears behind rocks and grass. The vertical trees and rock formations are also captivating, and guide the eye upward to the bright blue patch of sky that is visible at the top of the canvas. These competing elements do not make it easy for viewers to enter the image and feel as though they are among these surroundings.

The surface of the painting is not glossy, and there are no areas where more paint is applied than others. There is a difference in brushwork depending on which objects are being depicted. Tree trunks and rock formations have blocky and uniform brushstrokes, while the leaves on the trees, the clouds in the sky, the rocks in the water, and the stream all appear to have lighter brushstrokes defining them. In the various areas of shadow, the brushwork becomes blockier, and the various pictorial elements blend into one another. Every object has a distinct texture that remains consistent throughout its appearances in the image: the stream is bumpy and choppy, the leaves on the trees are soft, the tree bark is scratchy, and the rocks are rough. The shadowy areas in the composition are the only places where a distinct brushstroke is not visible. The thick and varied paint application in this landscape is due to Courbet's use of a palette knife in addition to brushes, which

allowed him to create areas of light paint application alongside areas of thicker, more powerful paintwork.

There is little to no emphasis on formal line in this composition. The tree trunks and branches are the closest things to solid lines in the image; all other instances of line are implied with brushwork and surrounding objects. For example, the large rock formations have sharp edges and vertical brushwork that act as lines to guide the eye upwards, but they are not formal lines. The tree trunk on the right side of the stream creates the most immediately visible line, which is on a slight diagonal. This is not a prominent line, because it is in a dark area of the canvas with minimal attention drawn to it. The other trees are more vertical, but are thin and barely visible, so their verticality is de-emphasized within the composition. The few diagonals created by some tree trunks and branches do not distract from the vertical emphasis of the piece. Overall, the dark areas of shadow and imposing rock formations overpower any formal lines present in the piece.

The stream, and the treetops that surround it, create implied diagonal lines that act as orthogonals and lead the eye to the back of the canvas, but they never connect. They both lead to a wall of green leaves, which stops the sense of depth that is present in the foreground and middle ground of the image. There are virtually no horizontal lines or elements in this piece either, which contributes to its vertical character, so there are very few competing elements to distract from the upward path the eye follows.

The many scattered rocks and boulders clutter up the composition, taking away from the orderly verticals created by the trees and rock formations. The rocks and boulders lying in the stream are each rendered with a tremendous amount of brushwork; Courbet used several different colors to define their shapes and textures. They also have many highlights and shadows in them, which makes them appear heavy and bulky. This heavy feeling draws the eye downward, and grounds the entire scene, which is otherwise so vertical that it could almost float away without these boulders to weigh it down. The boulders are also the only objects that touch the stream; everything else is neatly off to either side of it. Even the small plant located on the left side of the stream is growing on a rock, not out of the water.

All of these boulders make it extremely difficult for the viewer to find an opening through which to enter the painting. Furthermore, if the viewer could imagine him or herself walking through one of the gaps between these boulders, he or she would be stepping straight into water, which is an unpleasant and off-putting idea. Additionally, there is no spot of dry land for the viewer to inhabit or explore, and the scene ends abruptly with a wall of green in the middle of the canvas.

The objects in this image are clustered together in groups on both sides of the central stream. The rocks and boulders are practically on top of each other in the bottom corners, and the trees and rock formations have hardly any sense of space between them. All of the leaves are clustered into each other, and look like they are growing over every other object in the image as well. This is truer on the right side of the stream than on the left, but is still the case in a few areas to the left

of the stream as well. There is a lot of highlight and shadow in this image, but somehow there is very minimal definition of space between these objects, especially if they are closer to the sky. Some areas fall into complete shadow, making them the flattest parts of the image, as well as the darkest.

The colors in this composition are various hues of green, blue, white, black, brown, and grey. The plants and leaves, as well as the lichen and moss on the rocks are all green. The brightest green is in the very back of the scene, where the stream ends, and the darkest green is the cluster of leaves in the top right corner of the canvas. The sky is the only place where blue is used, and it rivals the green directly beneath it for the brightest spot in the scene. White is used in the clouds and to show ripples in the stream. All of the shadows in the scene are mostly, if not entirely, black and the darkest place in the canvas is where the stream ends, directly adjacent to the brightest part of the canvas. All of the tree trunks and branches are various shades of brown, and the rock formation on the left side of the canvas is brown as well. The rock formations on the right side of the canvas are grey, as are the majority of the rocks and boulders, although they have green and brown lichen growing on them as well. The left side of the canvas is brighter and more colorful than the right side of the canvas, which is rendered almost completely in shadow.

The light source comes from the top right of the scene, but not from the sky clearing. The visible patch of sky seems detached from the rest of the image, because it appears to have no influence on where light falls. The source of light seems to be just to the right of the clearing, because the left side of the landscape is

so much brighter than the right side. There are more highlights on the left side of the canvas, especially in the back of the painting where the stream ends, but there are still some highlights on the right side as well. The highlights on the right side of the piece are more muted and grey than those on the left side, which are bright and yellowed. The few highlights on the left side are probably coming through openings in the trees, which the viewer cannot see, although this is unlikely because of how dark the leaves on the right side are depicted. Both sides have a lot of shadow, but the right side is almost completely in shadow, while the left side has a few shadows that fall naturally with how the light hits each object. The overall gloomy atmosphere created through the dense shadows and use of grey in the image is another off-putting aspect of this image. This is another aspect that helps push the viewer out of the scene, rather than invite him or her in.

The sense of depth and perspective is difficult to decipher in this painting. There is linear perspective created by the stream and the clearing in the sky, but there is no atmospheric perspective. There is also no clear vanishing point, because the stream and the clearing in the sky end at the center of the canvas without connecting. The area where there should be a vanishing point is covered by shadows and a wall of green, which stops all sense of depth created by the rest of the painting. The clustered objects on either side of the stream, as well as the bright yellow-green of the grass at the end of the stream draw the eye to this location in the painting and then abandon it with nowhere to go.

In conclusion, *The Valley of Les-Puits Noir* is absorbed in itself. There is no space for the viewer to inhabit inside this landscape, and there is no space for the viewer to imagine him or herself entering the scene, so there is no intended role for the viewer within this landscape. This departs from the expected conventions for landscape paintings during this time, which were popularized by the Barbizon school. Despite this departure, Courbet's landscapes were very popular in the art market during his lifetime.¹⁴⁹

Courbet, Rousseau, Diaz, and Daubigny.

Theodoré Rousseau's *A Clearing in the Forest of Fontainebleau* (fig. 8),¹⁵⁰ Narcisse Diaz de la Peña's *The Edge of the Forest* (fig. 9),¹⁵¹ and Charles-François Daubigny's *Landscape with a Sunlit Stream* (fig. 10)¹⁵² when compared to Courbet's *The Valley of Les Puits-Noir* exemplify the stark differences in style and message between the Barbizon School and Courbet. These images by the Barbizon painters are light, bright, and pleasing, which invites the viewer to imagine him or herself

¹⁴⁹ Wagner, "Courbet's Landscapes and Their Market."

¹⁵⁰ Theodoré Rousseau. *A Clearing in the Forest of Fontainebleau*, oil on canvas, 32.5" x 57.25". 1860-62. Norfolk: Crysler Museum. More information about this painting can be found in the exhibition catalogue *In the Forest of Fontainebleau: Painters and Photographers from Corot to Monet*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

¹⁵¹ Narcisse Diaz de la Peña. *The Edge of the Forest*, oil on canvas, 27.9" x 38.7". 1871. Paris: Musée d'Orsay. More information about this painting can be found in Isabelle Compin and Anne Roquebert, *Catalogue sommaire illustré des peintures du Musée du Louvre et du Musée d'Orsay*, Paris, 1986.

¹⁵² Charles-François Daubigny. *Landscape with a Sunlit Stream*, oil on canvas, 25 1/8" x 18 7/8". 1877. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art. More information about this painting can be found in Madeleine Fidell-Beaufort and Janine Bailly-Herzberg. *Daubigny*. Paris, 1975, 138-139.

experiencing the depicted surroundings. Courbet's landscape, on the other hand, is dark and flat, and does not invite the viewer to become a part of the scene.

Rousseau's *A Clearing in the Forest of Fontainebleau* is a bright landscape scene with a blue cloudy sky, bright green trees, a bright green ground with a path running through it to the back of the scene, and a person in a red shirt far in the distance following the path into the forest. The path is visible in the middle of this painting, and is emphasized by the bright green grass around it and the large trees that flank it. The border of trees in this image in addition to the path help guide the viewer's eye back into this scene, and allow the viewer to imagine him or herself physically entering these surroundings and experiencing the space. The man in the red shirt far in the distance implies that this landscape extends forever; he invites the viewer to follow his example and take the path to the forest as well. The foreground of this image is also wide open and provides easy access for the viewer to enter the scene.

This painting includes many of the characteristics of a Barbizon landscape, such as a focus on light effects and an open bright canvas for the viewer to explore. The inclusion of a man walking down this inviting road communicates to viewers that they should follow this path too, which embodies the Barbizon message that people should return to nature and leave industrialized cities. The winding path that gracefully moves through this scene, the person shown following it into the forest, and the open inviting atmosphere of the scene all communicate to the viewer that he or she should retreat into this countryside as well. The scene is a little

darker around the edges of the painting, but then becomes brighter towards the center, again, drawing the viewer's attention to the endlessness of this scene. The core message of the Barbizon school was to get people to see the beauty of the uncorrupted countryside of France, and to abandon Paris for a return to rural existence.

The Valley of Les Puits-Noir is very different from *A Clearing in the Forest of Fontainebleau* in its atmospheric effects, lighting, depth, and message. *The Valley of Les Puits-Noir* has no convenient entrance into the scene, no place for the viewer to occupy, and it is gloomy and dark instead of bright and pleasing. The open and inviting qualities of *A Clearing in the Forest of Fontainebleau* are completely absent from Courbet's landscape. The contrast in formal qualities between these two images reflects the contrasting message they put forth. Rousseau's landscape encourages the viewer to enter, explore, and inhabit nature in order to escape the Second Empire. Courbet's painting deceives the viewer into trying to enter the scene, and then pushes him or her out of it, which communicates the idea that there is no serene nature to retreat into, and no escape from Napoleon III.

The conventions seen in Rousseau's *A Clearing in the Forest of Fontainebleau* can be seen in other artists of the Barbizon School as well. Narcisse Diaz de la Peña's *The Edge of the Forest* also contains imagery and formal elements that invites the viewer to enter and explore the countryside he has depicted. This scene is bright and open, with a path running straight from the center of the foreground to the center of the background. There is a row of trees on either side of this path,

which frames the intended entrance for the viewer, drawing him or her into the scene. There is also a person walking down this path towards the horizon, which appears to go on forever. This person included in the scene invites the viewer to follow him into the beautiful surroundings this location provides.

Similarly to Rousseau's *A Clearing in the Forest of Fontainebleau*, this scene has an open foreground, pleasant lighting, depth that makes the scene appear endless, and a person walking down a path for the viewer to follow. This image, like Rousseau's, puts forth the idea that the undisturbed countryside is endless, and people should return to living in these surroundings, rather than the dirty environment of Paris. The easy entrance for the viewer and example of what to do once inside the scene communicates the ease of living in the countryside. This image is designed to tempt people to return to a pastoral way of life.

The contrast between *The Edge of the Forest* and *The Valley of Les Puits-Noir* is drastic. The Diaz scene is about the endlessness of the natural countryside, and depicts this message through a clear vanishing point and a horizon line that continues the forest far beyond what the eye can see. The bright colors and pleasant lighting also makes the scene more enjoyable for the viewer to look at and imagine occupying. *The Valley of Les Puits-Noir*, on the other hand, is dark and flat, and provides no easy entrance for the viewer because of the stream that occupies the entire foreground of the image. Even if the viewer did step into this, there are many boulders also present in the foreground that adds another obstacle to the entrance of the painting. The clearing in the sky and the opening of the stream should act as

orthogonals that will eventually connect and create a vanishing point, thus implying depth in the image. This is not the case, however, and instead the viewer is misled into this scene then abandoned at a flat wall of greenery in the center of the painting. This treatment of depth implies that Courbet wanted everyone to stay away from the countryside near Ornans. It also implies that he did not think the return to a pastoral way of life would eliminate the influence of Napoleon III and industrialization in people's everyday lives.

Finally, Charles-François Daubigny's *Landscape with a Sunlit Stream* epitomizes the Barbizon message of returning to nature and escaping industrialization because it depicts a beautiful bright landscape and a simple home nested within it. There is a stream in the center of the foreground, a house surrounded by brightly colored greenery at its end, a path to the right of the stream that leads to the house, and a person on the other side of the stream, mid-stride, looking as if he or she is about to enter the home depicted. The trees on either side of the stream also bend inwards, and create a pointed arch framing of the simple white home in this bucolic setting. The bright green color, which dominates the entire scene, highlights the center of the canvas, which shows this ideal rustic house. The person about to enter it stands out as well, because he or she is dressed in bright blue and red. This draws the viewer's attention as well, and communicates the idea that the person viewing this scene could have this simple rustic existence too. The stream and the path to its right also provide an easy and tempting entrance

for the viewer to imagine him or herself following towards this home, tempting him or her to return to this way of life.

The inclusion of a person in each of the Barbizon School paintings discussed above is an important convention. This person provides a model for the viewer to follow, and tells the viewer to enter and explore nature. These paintings are also all bright, pleasing, and create depth so the viewer can imagine him or herself inhabiting this seemingly endless scene. The uncorrupted view these painters provide also reinforces their view that everyone should return to the unspoiled countryside of France, rather than living in and contributing to the industrialization and materialization of Paris under Napoleon III.

Courbet's Landscape is drastically different from all of the Barbizon landscapes discussed because of his use of flatness in the image, the overall dark and gloomy atmosphere of the scene, the lack of an easy entrance into the scene, and the omission of a person to demonstrate how to inhabit the scene to the viewer. In fact, in Courbet's landscape there is no place for the viewer to inhabit. This is the fundamental difference between Courbet and the Barbizon, and the messages they wanted to communicate to viewers. While they both hated Napoleon III's industrialization and expansion into the countryside, the Barbizon School thought nature could provide an escape from the influence and expansion of the Second Empire. Courbet, on the other hand, did not believe that nature provided an escape from Napoleon III, and wanted people to stay away from his hometown.

CONCLUSION

Courbet's *The Valley of Les Puits-Noir* is flat and dark, and prevents the viewer from inhabiting it. These formal aspects make the scene less pleasing to the viewer, so there is less of a chance that he or she would want to physically travel to Ornans to see this place in person. The Barbizon landscapes, by contrast, are pleasing and inviting, which is what the artists wanted. They were also successful in the art markets, and their popularity helped increase tourism to the Forest of Fontainebleau. The popularity of travel to the forest motivated the government to redesign it for revenue purposes.

Since Ornans was an easy trip from Paris, Courbet may have worried that a similar fate would befall his hometown if his paintings were as inviting as those of the Barbizon school. A visible presence of the Second Empire near his home would have been a nightmare for Courbet; he would want to keep the Empire away from it. Courbet still needed to make money though, which was becoming more difficult with his increasingly controversial genre scenes. Landscapes were very popular and successful in the market during this time period, and provided a neutral vehicle for his negative political views. Courbet would not have compromised his critical view of the Second Empire to make money, which is evident in his refusal to create a government-sanctioned artwork for the 1855 Universal Exposition.

In the case of *The Valley of Les Puits-Noir*, Courbet is reacting against the expanded reach and influence of Napoleon III into the countryside, which was aided

by the expanded railways. Since Courbet was an opponent of the Second Empire, he would not have condoned its expanded influence into the surroundings environs of Paris. He depicts this view through the flatness and darkness of this scene, which contrasts to the idyllic atmospheres of the Barbizon landscapes. The formal elements in *The Valley of Les Puits-Noir* articulate that there is no such thing as an ideal and untouched countryside free of the dark shadow that is the presence of the Second Empire. This reading is not considered by current scholarship on the subject of Courbet's landscapes.

My political reading of *The Valley of Les Puits-Noir* can be useful for future research on the topic of Courbet's landscapes. Such research may include a deeper formal reading of Courbet's depictions of the Puits-Noir, and the surrounding areas of Ornans. This could provide useful insight as to why Courbet's landscapes are so much darker and flatter than others done during this time period. Another interesting study would be a comparison of Courbet's landscapes of areas in France to his landscapes of Switzerland, which he produced during his exile. A significant difference may further elucidate Courbet's feelings about the French government.

Appendix of Images



Figure 1.
Gustave Courbet
The Stonebreakers
1849
Oil on canvas
5' 5" x 7' 9"
Destroyed

Table 4 Prices of Landscape Paintings, by Nationality, for Four Generations *

Nationality	Prices in Livres						Prices in Francs						
	1737-1756 Average			1757-1776 Average			1817-1837 Average			1838-1857 Average			
	Maximum	Minimum		Maximum	Minimum		Maximum	Minimum		Maximum	Minimum		
By then-living French painters	200	167 (3)	150	5,950 (29)	1,587 (29)	96	2,550 (2)	1,500		8,000 (49)	1,443 (49)	27	
All French	4,003	905 (19)	80	12,000 (60)	1,856 (60)	15	4,900 (10)	360		8,600 (72)	1,661 (72)	27	
Italian	300	191 (13)	100	2,820 (7)	992 (7)	93	50 (2)	50		2,200 (3)	1,167 (3)	650	
Dutch	1,860	743 (32)	50	27,400 (56)	3,532 (56)	41	37,100 (41)	50		96,500 (78)	11,560 (78)	275	
Flemish	9,905	5,452 (2)	1,000	5,050 (15)	2,068 (15)	600	9,500 (5)	58		7,350 (2)	4,700 (2)	2,050	
Other							5,005 (10)	1,902 (10)	210		4,900 (5)	1,418 (5)	300

* Below each trio of prices is stated in parentheses the number of paintings to which they refer.

Figure 2.

Landscape price chart.

From: White, Harrison C. and Cynthia A. White. *Canvases and Careers: Institutional Change in the French Painting World*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993. Page 41.



Figure 3.
Gustave Courbet
The Valley of Les Puits-Noir
1868, oil on canvas, 43 ¾" x 54 ¼"
Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago.



Figure 4.
Gustave Courbet
Venus and Psyche
1864
Oil on canvas, 57" x 77"
Location unknown

Table 7. *Volume of passenger traffic*

	1852	1869
Passenger traffic (in thousands of millions of travellers per km)		
by road	1.36	1.46
by rail	0.988	4.1
Total	2.348	5.56

Table 8. *Volume of freight traffic*

	1852	1869
Freight traffic (domestic transport, in thousands of millions of tonnes per km)		
by road	2.6	2.8
on canals and waterways	1.7	2.0
by sea (coastal navigation)	1.3	0.8
by rail	0.6	6.22
Total	6.2	11.82

Source: Toutain (143).

Figure 5.

Growth in railway travel between 1852 and 1869 chart.

From:

J. Toutain, *Les Transports en France de 1830 à 1965*, quoted in
Alain Plessis, *The Rise and Fall of the Second Empire, 1852-1871*,
trans. Jonathan Mandelbaum (Cambridge: Cambridge University
Press, 1977), 86.



Figure 6.
 Gustave Courbet
The Studio of the Painter: a Real Allegory Summing up Seven Years of my Artistic and Moral Life
 1855, oil on canvas, 142" x 235"
 Paris: Musée d'Orsay.



Figure 7.
 Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot.
The Lake
 1861, oil on canvas, 52
 3/8" x 62"
 New York: the Frick
 Collection



Figure 8.
Théodore Rousseau
A Clearing in the Forest of Fontainebleau
1860-62, oil on canvas, 32.5" x 57.25"
Norfolk: Chrysler Museum.



Figure 9.
Narcisse Diaz de la Peña
The Edge of the Forest
1871, oil on canvas, 27.9" x 38.7"
Paris: Musée d'Orsay



Figure 10.
Charles-François Daubigny
Landscape with a Sunlit Stream
1877, oil on canvas, 25 1/8 x 18 7/8
New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art

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